

Cultural interventions required

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In the past, when we fought for women's rights, we were told, "Don't bring the movement into the household." But now, if you tell a woman not to bring the movement into her home, she will not sit quietly. If society had evolved collectively, women's progress would not face such resistance.

TDS: How effective is our legal framework in safeguarding and protecting women? Is it sufficient, or are there areas that need improvement?

FM: Legally, while existing laws are insufficient, they are not insignificant. If properly enforced, they could offer substantial protection for women's rights. However, the gap between legislation and implementation remains a major challenge.

For instance, the High Court directed all educational institutions to establish committees for addressing violence against women. However, this directive was never enacted into law.

Similarly, although the two-finger test for rape survivors

has been legally banned and the Ministry of Health has issued protocols for proper medical examinations, the practice persists. This continues due to a lack of awareness among doctors and even lawyers and a misguided belief that the test is necessary.

Another example is the Family Protection Law, enacted in the early 1990s, which provides women with legal recourse within the family structure in cases of threats or violence. Yet, in all these years, only a handful of cases have been filed under this law—largely because people are unaware of it, and legal professionals seldom invoke it. The core issue is the severe limitations in accessing justice. The judicial system is in crisis, creating significant barriers, and women face these

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challenges even more acutely.

TDS: What do you think are the main obstacles that hinder women's representation, empowerment, and access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities?

FM: The biggest obstacle is the lack of state accountability, which is not just a concern with the current government, but a systemic issue across all administrations. Despite international conventions, women's rights remain inadequately protected. This is not just due to religion but also communalism and state involvement in religious affairs.

The National Women Development Policy has never been fully implemented. Even under pro-Liberation governments, it was constrained by Islamic law. Another barrier is the institutionalisation of religious fundamentalism in governance.

Education must be gender-sensitive to drive societal change. Child marriage forces many girls to drop out, and the system must intervene to reintegrate them. Gender quotas are essential in education, employment, and leadership to combat systemic discrimination.

Media representation must also improve to reflect women's issues accurately. Without these reforms, meaningful progress in women's rights remains unattainable.

TDS: Despite the challenges, what positive changes have you observed?

FM: Overall, I see a positive shift in one important aspect—women now want to be empowered. In the past, many women stayed hidden, thinking, "Whatever little I get within my family is enough for me."

Women are now eager to claim their space in society. This desire for empowerment is growing across all levels of society, from grassroots to elite.

Women's movements have become a collective force in some ways. More women are now engaged in various organisations. However, even though there is a growing focus on patriarchy as a central issue, we must remember that societal transformation cannot happen in isolation. Both men and women have roles to play in ensuring human rights. The broader fight for human rights must go hand in hand with the fight for gender equality.

I believe that the continuity of the movement, the relationship between the national movement and the women's movement, and how women should progress can be understood through past experiences and applied to today's actions. Ultimately, the goal remains the same: to dismantle patriarchy and establish equality. To achieve this, all women's movements must find common ground and unite, though there are still significant barriers to this unity.

TDS: Which key areas should we prioritise to ensure women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, while also promoting their participation in all sectors, including politics and society?

FM: First, we need to identify immediate steps that can effectively put an end to violence against women. Second, education must be prioritised. We need to ensure 100% primary school enrollment and increase women's participation in higher education, particularly in STEM fields. Third, employment opportunities must be expanded.

Advancing women's rights is essential to fulfilling international commitments like the SDGs. Women must be included in policy making, using quotas if necessary, to ensure their voices are heard.

Women's empowerment and the establishment of their rights are not tasks that can be completed overnight; they are ongoing processes that will persist as long as human civilisation exists. A significant gap remains between legal equality and lived reality. Women often face an impossible choice between career and personal life.

Historically, motherhood came with severe restrictions—women were confined, isolated, and subjected to rigid customs. Maternity should be recognised as a social responsibility, and the state must act accordingly to ensure supportive policies. While some of these traditions have faded, many patriarchal norms persist.

Transforming societal norms remains a major challenge for women's rights movements. Such deep-rooted patriarchal norms can only be reformed through cultural interventions, yet there remains a significant void in this area. Historically, literature, music, and cinema fueled social movements, yet such cultural expressions are now lacking. Reviving these mediums is essential for challenging outdated norms and achieving true social transformation.

The interview was taken by Saudia Afrin.



ILLUSTRATION:
BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

Deep-rooted stigmas hinder social inclusion of persons with disabilities

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Even when hired, persons with disabilities often face inaccessible work environments and lack of reasonable accommodations, hindering their job retention. Additionally, employers often fail to recognise the skills and potential of persons with disabilities, and there is a lack of patience in providing necessary support.

TDS: What are the primary challenges in mitigating skill gaps, and what needs to be done to address them?

MP: The challenges in addressing skill gaps for persons with disabilities are multi-faceted, including the lack of tailored training programs, inaccessible TVET institutes, and a disconnect between training providers and employers. Many TVET institutes lack necessary accessibility features such as ramps, sign language interpreters, and Braille materials, preventing enrollment. Additionally, training programs often fail to align with job market demands.

To address these challenges, TVET institutes must offer accessible, inclusive

matching and self-employment initiatives. In my office, we have three employees with disabilities who perform exceptionally well, proving that with the right support and training, persons with disabilities can be valuable assets to any team.

TDS: How far are we from achieving an inclusive Bangladesh?

MP: When I started, awareness about disabilities was minimal, but over the last three decades, societal integration has improved. However, we are still behind in providing adequate facilities for an inclusive society. To build an inclusive Bangladesh, we must adopt universal design, as 99% of our infrastructure is inaccessible.

While persons with mild disabilities are finding jobs, those with severe disabilities like visual, intellectual, or cognitive impairments, along with those with hearing or speech disabilities, face barriers despite their education and skills.

TVET institutes must prioritise disability inclusion, enhance accessibility, and offer tailored training to boost employability. Additionally, reasonable accommodations should be made in education, health, and employment. Technology has opened job opportunities, especially for freelancing in fields like content writing and web development. Despite ongoing efforts, the employment rates for persons with disabilities, both in government and private sectors, remain low.

TDS: How effective do you think current policies and laws are in supporting inclusivity, and what areas need immediate reform?

MP: The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013 is a good law but lacks certain provisions. When the law was made, the sexual and reproductive health and rights aspect as well as disability inclusive climate change adaptation aspects were not addressed separately, though it should have been. Moreover, the law has not been fully implemented. In light of this act, the action plan was made in 2019, which will end in 2025. However, only minimal work has been done, even as the five-year period is about to end.

We also have National Employment Policy 2022, National Skill Development Policy 2022, Bangladesh National Building Code 2020, Standing Orders on Disasters 2019, which cover different areas to ensure the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities. It is high time we started implementing these policies as per their action plan.



A middle-aged man with a physical disability is seen heading home after buying fresh produce. We must improve accessibility for people with disabilities in every aspect of life.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

TDS: Which areas should the government address to eliminate the discrimination faced by people with disabilities?

MP: I believe that the implementation of existing laws must be ensured with an action plan and target. The target should be set for all government and non-government offices. I have been advocating for a long time that if offices are instructed that out of every 10 employees, one must be a person with a disability. According to law, employers could receive tax rebates for hiring them. If employers focus on these issues, more employment could be created.

The cases of physical and sexual abuse against women and children with disabilities linger for years. There should be a timeframe to resolve these cases. I know a girl whose case of rape has been ongoing for 7 to 8 years.

Besides, if a person with disabilities is not properly educated, they will be left out of the mainstream. The government should invest more in the education and employment sectors. If a person has a job, they can take care of their family, manage their own expenses, and gain respect.

TDS: What role can the young people play in building a more inclusive Bangladesh?

MP: Young people have a crucial role to play in fostering inclusivity. They can start by changing their own attitudes and

perceptions about persons with disabilities. Simple acts of support, such as helping a classmate with disabilities to access study materials or accompanying them to educational institutions, can make a big difference.

When I was young, I saw many young volunteers doing social work willingly. I often get very disappointed that the support I received during my youth is rarely seen nowadays. But I believe bringing back that spirit is important and today's youth have the ability to bring that spirit.

Young people can also advocate for policy changes and participate in initiatives that promote disability inclusion. For example, they can volunteer with organisations working for persons with disabilities or organise awareness campaigns in their communities. By standing with their peers with disabilities, young people can help create a more inclusive and equitable society.

During the July Uprising, many young people became persons with physical or visual disabilities due to injuries. If their peers stand by them and ensure they are not forgotten, it will send a powerful message of solidarity and can contribute to achieving a truly inclusive Bangladesh.

The interview was taken by Saudia Afrin.



Women in wheelchairs engage in a game of basketball.

PHOTO:
SHEIKH MEHEDI
MORSHED

programs with accommodations like adaptive technologies and trained instructors. They should also collaborate with local employers to align training with market needs and facilitate job matching. OPDs can play a vital role in bridging these gaps by advocating for inclusive training, mentoring trainees, and raising employer awareness.

At Access Bangladesh Foundation, we actively work on skills development and employment for persons with disabilities. We offer training, organise job fairs, and collaborate with local TVET institutes, employers, and government agencies for job